

REINVENTING POLITICS: NEIGHBOURHOOD ASSEMBLIES IN KENYA

The rejection of the draft constitution in the November 2005 referendum shelved the first attempt at comprehensive reform of local government in Kenya. In the absence of a comprehensive framework on the management of local affairs, efforts to enhance citizen participation have had to rely on the piecemeal administrative reforms carried out since the late 1990s. These reforms, however, have been insufficient to deliver meaningful citizen participation and downward accountability.

Examples of such piecemeal reforms include a 1999 directive to establish the Local Authorities Transfer Fund (LATF), which transfers five percent of national income tax to the country's 174 local authorities (LAs). The release of 40 per cent of a local authority's allocation under the LATF is contingent on the involvement of local residents in drawing up a Local Authority Service Delivery Action Plan (LASDAP).

Experience so far, however, suggests that without a change in the culture of local governance, the participatory processes created through these reforms have been pigeon-holed; there is no indication that they have the potential to gradually transform mainstream local government toward a culture of transparency and answerability to local residents. The culture of opacity remains entrenched. Most municipal decision-making in Kenya does not involve the public, and budgetary and expenditure information is seldom available to the public.

Still, with the growing frustration has also come increased efforts by civil society to ensure that local government remains responsive and transparent. One notable example of a civil society-led initiative to carve a space for citizen participation is the Neighbourhood Assemblies.

Assembling in Vihiga

In 1998, the government of Kenya advertised a call for proposals for community-based projects. Financed by the European Union, the Community Development Fund expected community-based organizations to raise 25 percent of the proposed budget.

One self-help group based in the town of Vihiga (which bears the same name as the district in which it is located) was interested to apply, but could not raise the necessary funds from among its members. The group of women sought advice on the matter from the Christian Partners Development Agency, which suggested they approach the MP for their district.

At the MP's office, the women were told that he was not in, but as they discussed their next step, the MP walked through the office. The group was disappointed by the lie, but also inspired. They ultimately raised their own money, and partly in disgust with the state of politics, decided to reconfigure their group as a Neighbourhood Assembly, a parliament of villagers.

The concept of Neighbourhood Assemblies has since been adopted by the Christian Partners Development Agency. At the end of 2008, there were over 100 neighbourhood assemblies established in Vihiga and Kakamega Districts, and the organization is currently looking for resources that would allow them to expand the model even further.

One idea, many issues

Neighbourhood Assemblies are forms of village level parliaments, intended to address common concerns such as poverty, food security, local leadership and governance. The assemblies have an elected convenor, who is expected to represent the neighbourhood's interests in other forums.

In essence, the assemblies are sites for cultivating alternative forms of leadership. They are not affiliated with any political party; in fact, open party affiliation is discouraged. The remit of the assemblies is determined by the members themselves, though each is operated with a similar governance structure. As a new assembly is established, the Christian Partners Development Agency provides training for assembly members on the procedures and principles of operating one.

The assemblies rely on public deliberation, careful recording of minutes and democratic voting. They have tackled an array of different issues.

In Vihiga and Kakamega districts, Neighbourhood Assemblies have been directly involved in the prioritization, implementation and monitoring of community-funded projects identified through the LASDAP.

In the town of Magui, the Neighbourhood Assembly uncovered the mismanagement of relief food supplies by the area Assistant Chief. They forwarded their complaint to the District Commissioner and copied to the Division Officer. As a result of this, the Assistant Chief was suspended and eventually terminated.

The joint efforts of Neighbourhood Assemblies in Evojo, Chavakali and Lisaswa have addressed incidences of sexual abuse at a local school that involved a headmaster who had bribed the children's guardians in an attempted cover up.

Another Neighbourhood Assembly helped to get the National Constituency Development Fund Management Committee and Kenya Anti-Corruption Commission to investigate a number of ghost projects in the area. The Assembly discovered the irregularity when they noticed the local government had referred to a number of projects on its website that in fact had never been carried out.

Challenges

Establishing Neighbourhood Assemblies has not been easy. It has required sustained efforts by capable community organizers. And even with proper facilitation, not all cases have been successful.

In each instance, winning the trust and cooperation of external actors has been difficult. Local administrators, civic leaders and MPs have all been fearful that Neighbourhood Assemblies were being created to fight them. Overcoming this apprehension has required investments in sensitization activities.

The Neighbourhood Assemblies have often built upon existing self-help groups in the communities. As a result, membership is often still dominated by women. New National Assemblies are making more deliberate efforts to ensure a 50-50 representation, and to encourage youth involvement.

Sustainability has been a major challenge to many Neighbourhood Assemblies. Those that have overcome this challenge have integrated sustainability schemes into their operations, such as *merry-go-round* savings, fund raising and income generation activities, among others. Furthermore, Christian Partners Development Agency has discovered that it is essential to ensure that all established Neighbourhood Assemblies are registered as Community-Based Organizations so that they can more effectively access public and foundation funding.

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